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Certain forms and aspects of the online communication in European and Romanian Academic institutions

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Abstract

This work refers to the modern technologies in the field of communication sciences, whose “globalizing” turn shades its utility within the educational systems in the European academic teaching. Summarising, the investigation targets the online system which have become an increasingly present reality in the promotion strategies of Universities. The main objective is to make a comparative and statistical research regarding the way in which universities in Europe and Romania focus effective communication strategies through the new technologies, in order to disseminate the information towards the exterior, to multiple beneficiaries, through websites. The ultimate purpose is identifying the defining particularities – illustrating traditions, cultures and experiences that vary from one country to the other – which are drawn at the same time as the communication-information process is obtained through the most efficient technologies used as educational marketing instruments.

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1. Introduction

The present research is oriented towards one of the aspects arose as a result of the IT&C (Information Technology and Communications) evolution, namely it analyses the impact of the Internet in the educational field, through which online communication can influence the options of the youth / candidates (Cuilenburg, J., J.van, Scholten, O. & Noomen, G., W., 1998). The economic globalization, generated by the unprecedented evolution registered by science and technology during the last decades, increasingly forces the management of education institutions to orient towards a new concept of structuring and organising the educational system, in order to cope with the transformations of the society. A new approach not only means a change of paradigm, but a genuine approach of finding fast and efficient means of media communication (Balaban, D., C., 2009) and of conceiving /

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adjusting the educational products to the needs of the society. The special accomplishments in the field of communications made it possible to live broadcast information in every geographic area of the world, thus reaching what we would call the desire of the humanity: that of communicating directly through "prosthetics" in real time. Within this communication system, education institutions can offer great variety public service, designed through the concept of eMarketing, which is different from the traditional marketing (Popescu, I. C., 2002), firstly by the extinction of the intermediaries and through the possibility of obtaining the desired information in real time, directly from the Website (Veghes, I. & Ruff, B., G. (2003). The advantage of this information system is given by the possibility of approach from the user's perspective, which generates increased interactivity, lower costs, and also a growth of the competitiveness between providers of educational services or products (Stepan A., Petrov Gh. & Iordan V., 1995). Using the modern communication techniques and instruments has allowed educational institutions to identify the most appropriate alternatives for reaching the objectives targeted in the strategic plans (Maxim, C. & Banciu, D., 2009). The online communication system has favoured the orientation of universities towards the specific needs of the beneficiaries (Cabin, Ph. & Dortier, J.-F., 2010) and has offered them the advantage of creating new needs, thus allowing them to develop, even during this period marked by serious economic or social issues. The study briefly presents the structure and functions of the informational system, in a ranking that emphasizes those presented above: (a) the phase of extracting the information / results; (b) the data, which, in order to become relevant turns into (c) information, noting that it has the following characteristics: the information is human (does not exist unless the observation of people), has a relative value, from person to person, is a reusable resource, has the tendency to spread (is volatile), but its multiplication does not diminish its value, it is a determining factor of human behaviour, represents a decision factor (Stepan, A., 2006). Along with components such as recording, stocking, processing that follow the above trail in a parallel circuit, from the perspective of our research, the most important aspect of an informational system is communication, within which the sending of information between various users located in different geographical places is realised.

2. The aim of the research

The main purpose of the research is to study the way that European Universities have developed the external communication and educational marketing activity (Iacob, M., Iacob, D. & Ion, E., 1999), in order to adapt the educational system and study programs to suit the needs of the consumers and the market economy requests.

2.1. General objectives

The main objective was gaining certain data regarding: (a) the impact of the information communicated through the European universities' websites over the image and educational performances, (b) their content, (c) the transparency, (d) the utility, and last but not least, (d) their relevance to the potential beneficiaries.

2.1.1. Specific objectives

- Determining the degree of interest that the universities have in promoting the information regarding the academic offer in a professional, transparent and efficient way;
- The role and importance of external communication and marketing in promoting and development of the educational system;
- Using marketing as a support in the strategic development and increasing the notoriety of the university studies institutions;
- Identifying defining characteristics – illustrating traditions, cultures and experiences that vary from a country to another, which can be drawn at the same time with the communication-information process gained through the most efficient technologies, used as educational marketing tools.

3. Methodology

In order to better respond to the established objectives and to correctly measure the relevant elements, the research method used was the quantitative one, and the specific technique was a comparative study of the EU-27

Universities' websites. The research collectivity was represented by all the Universities from countries in the EU-27. In order to be able to make a relevant selection from the point of view of the objectives followed, we chose the universities ranked in Top 500 ARWU 2012, and for the countries who do not have universities present in this ranking, we have taken on an analysis of those that have a presentation website, without checking more than ten institutions for each EU member country. The selection was random, seeking to comprise both the older and newer universities – public or private – in the sample, where it was possible. Thus, the research comprised 199 universities from the 27 European Union member countries. Within the selected universities, the websites of 1,549 faculty websites, comprised in 25 bachelor's study profiles were analysed. According to the data offered by *Webometrics*, the European Union has 5,872 universities, meaning that the 3.39% institutions analysed out of this total, represent a cover rate that offers representative results on European level.

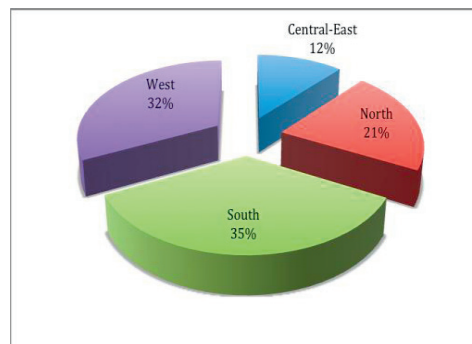


Figura 1. The sample structure based on the number of universities selected from the 27 countries of the EU, in regional groups

In order to be able to design comparative analyses, the regional grouping was used: The Central and Eastern Europe: The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Romania; Northern Europe: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Sweden; Southern Europe: Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain, Slovenia, Cyprus; Western Europe: Austria, Belgium, The United Kingdom, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Ireland, Luxembourg.

Out of the 199 selected universities, 105 can be found in the ARWU 2012 ranking, the rest being chosen from the list of universities corresponding to EU member countries. In the countries with a lower number of universities ranked in the ARWU 2012, the analysis only focused on the universities present in the ranking. I considered this ranking to be important, since it reflects the excellencies climate and provides benchmarks over the aspects related to the performance that needs to be followed by each university in the context of globalising the higher education's market. The ranking used in the ARWU has become a relevant tool on the international level, the Top 500 comprising the most competitive universities in the world. Due to this selection criterion, universities ranked in ARWU 2012 as well as unranked, the structure of the samples on a regional level is less balanced, since there are areas, such as the South of Europe where only two out of the eight countries have universities ranked in Top 500. At the opposite end are the countries in the Western group, where only two of the eight countries comprised in the research do not have universities in the ARWU 2012.

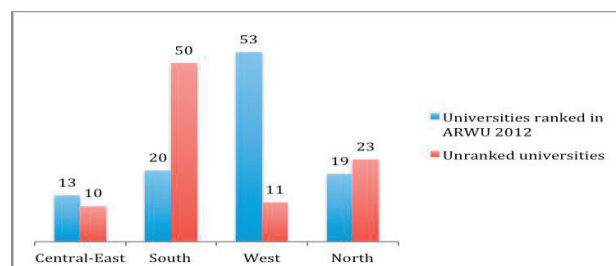


Fig. 2. The sample structure based on the number of universities ranked or unranked in the ARWU 2012, in EU countries on regional groups

For a correct information collection within the quantitative research, a form with multiple items has been designed, and each university has been analysed based on it. The filling of the form has been completed after studying the website of each university comprised by the survey, by checking the lines on a scale with three indicators (a = complete information; b = incomplete information; c = missing information), but also by marking certain qualitative information useful for understanding and interpreting the data.

The information was gathered during January – March 2013, being processed, analysed and interpreted during April – May 2013.

*Even though Croatia is a state member of the EU, it was accepted at a later date than our study.

4. Analysis and interpretation of the results of the research

The research of each university has been based on ten quantitative indicators: (1) it is ranked in the ARWU 2012; (2) has an English version of the website; (3) the faculties are presented in English; (4) the teachers have an adequate presentation (European CV in English) and direct phone and electronic contacts; (5) has a marketing department / office; (6) has a communication department / office; (7) has an international relations department / office; (8) presents annual reports and statistic data regarding the students, graduates, available budgets; (9) offers student facilities: accommodation, meal, living conditions, costs; (10) the faculties' profile.

4.1. The online communication system in the Central and East European universities

Within the research conducted in the Central and Eastern Europe, there were 23 higher education institutions: Czech Republic (4 universities), Hungary (2 universities), Poland (6 universities), Slovakia (one university) and Romania (10 universities). For each country, only the institutions indexed in the ARWU 2012 have been selected. Due to the fact that our country does not have any university in this country, 10 higher education institutions have been selected randomly, similar to the proceedings for other EU countries that found themselves in the same situation. The analysis made according to the first indicator (the existence of an English version of the university's website) favours Romania as being the only country in this regional group in which one university does not have an English version of the website, and other two institutions offer partial information (the faculties only appear by their English name or in a mixture of presentation in Romanian and English). On the other hand, Romania is the only country in the group that has an university with a communication office, even described with its main attributions. The Czech Republic has one university which mentions the name and contact for the person in charge with PR and marketing on the website. None of the universities has a marketing office / department, an essential structure in the process of adapting the educational system to the modern economy requests and connecting with the labour market in order to increase the graduates' chances of finding a workplace and of developing a professional career in the future. Although even since 1955 Philip Kotler predicted that „*Its main task (social marketing, s.n.) is to determine the needs, desires and interests of its clients and to adapt the institutions in order to offer them the desired satisfaction or to increase the wellbeing of the consumers and of the society on the long term*” (Kotler, Fox, 1995), not even after more than half of century the universities do not apply the educational marketing techniques that are so necessary in the process of analysis, planning, implementation and control of study programmes. Foreign students can obtain rather clear information in the International Relations section, where most of the universities detail the conditions and procedures of admission, the regulations, ways of taking exams, access options and the mobility of European programmes, etc. Yet there are also universities that only offer a brief presentation of collaboration programmes with various universities of the world and of ERASMUS programmes. Regarding this indicator, Romania also is in dissonance: four universities out of ten do not have an international relations office and neither do they have information regarding the admission of foreign students. Only six universities in the Central and East European group offer detailed information regarding the facilities offered, about accommodation, meal, professional counselling, recreational options, etc., along with financial details to those interested in these. Seven universities have partial information, and ten do not present any information on their websites that would be useful for the students who wish to know where they can accommodate, where they can have their meals and what expenses are

incurred by the option of studying in that particular country or city.

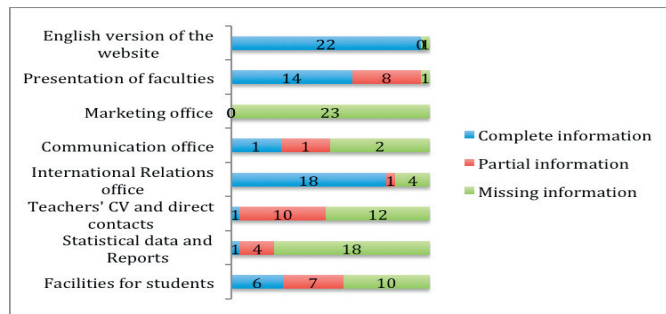


Fig. 3. The results of the analysis of the online communication system indicators in Central and Eastern European universities

One can hardly find information about the teachers of the universities, although it is known that the teachers' reputation represents one of the most important criteria in defining the quality level of the study process and the prestige of the university. Only a single university, located in Poland, has an adequate presentation of the professors' core, with CVs to underline the experience, value and personal contribution to increasing the performances of the institution. Also, not much information can be found regarding the reports about the annual situation of the university under the aspect of activity, gained results and budget usage. Only a single university, Masaryk, located in the Czech Republic has presented complete and transparent reports on the website, regarding the budget usage, as annual brochures. Other four universities present statistical data about the students, graduates, research activities, etc., but without a financial situation. If we are to make a comparison between the universities present in the ARWU 2012 and those unranked, based on the results registered on the first eight analysis indicators, one can easily notice that those listed by the ARWU have a significantly larger amount of information offered on the website.



Fig. 4. The degree of transparency and complexity of the information communicated on the Central and Eastern European universities' websites

The results found can receive relevant explanation by making a comparison with those registered regarding other universities, grouped in other geographical areas of Europe. The further we go towards the West and North of the continent, the more we can find an increase in volume and quality from the point of view of utility and transparency of the online information.

5. Conclusions

Emerged somewhat late to the countries in the former communist block, the communication technologies have shaped the premises of globalisation as an economic, social and political phenomenon. Relevant explanation can be achieved by comparison with the data registered regarding universities grouped in other geographical areas of Europe. The more we go towards the West and North of the continent, the more we find an increase in volume and quality from the point of view of utility and transparency of the online information. Briefly, the study system in the

former communist states, where our country was also enrolled, show two contradictory aspects: (1) the transition as an actual state; (2) the effort of synchronising in the educational field, both underlining lacks and aspirations.

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